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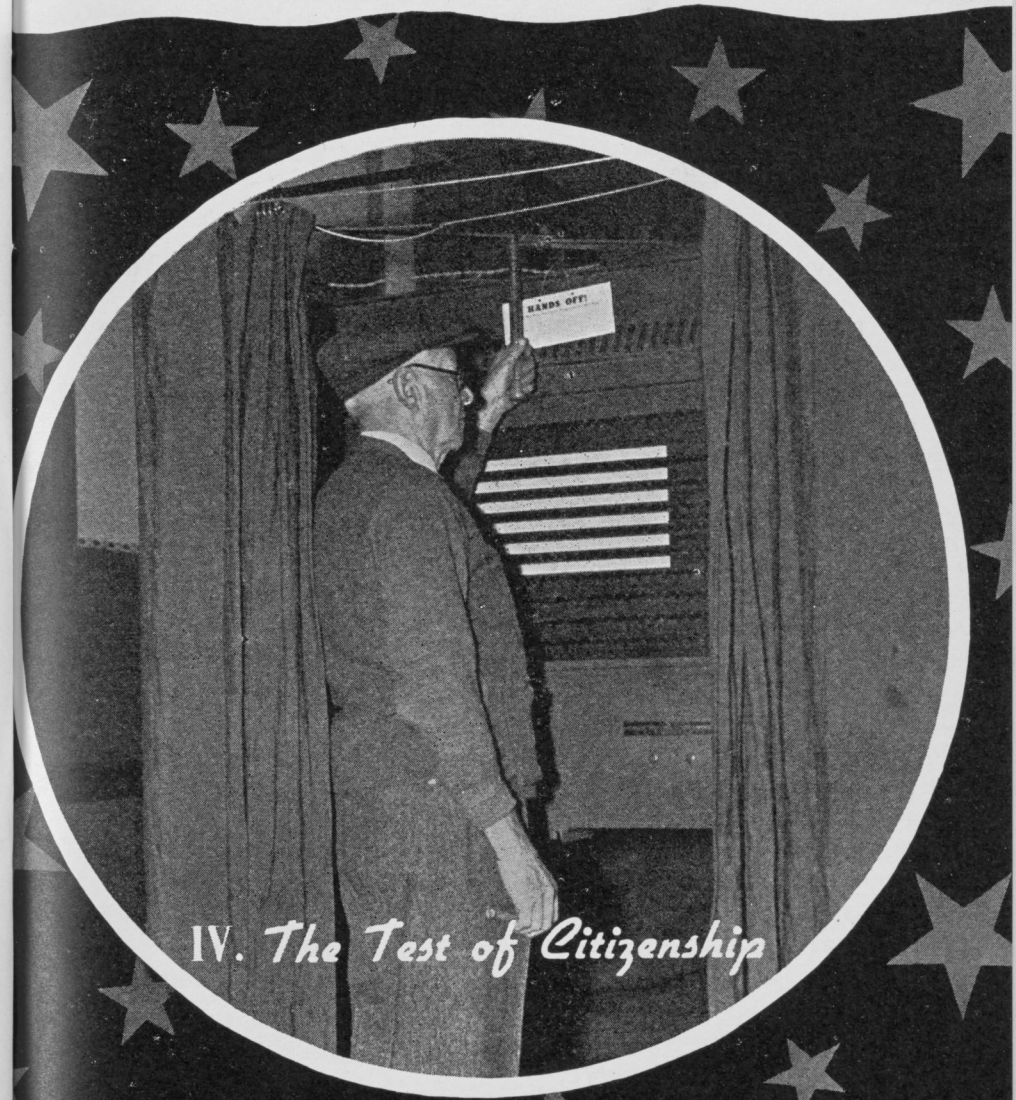
The Challenge to DEMOCRACY



IV. The Test of Citizenship

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The Challenge to Democracy

IV. The Test of Citizenship[1]

By V. Alton Moody[2]

PRIVILEGES

When democracy is challenged there comes to its people a test of their worthiness of the citizenship enjoyed. That the test is too little publicized and that it is too often ignored by those failing to measure up to it makes it no less rigorous, no less demanding and no less indicative of possible service to democracy. An understanding of the test entails a knowledge of the privileges extended to those people, the obligations incurred, the obstacles in the way of the fullest enjoyment of that citizenship and the opportunities offered.

Not only are American citizens guaranteed certain oftenmentioned rights, but most may enjoy many privileges in which they take pride. Not only is one guaranteed certain rights upon which his life and liberty are believed to depend, but certain privileges are extended to him for the benefit of the community. Not only is his life and liberty protected from others, but he and his fellows may have an appropriate part in determining the conditions under which they live and have liberty.

In addition to participating in party meetings and voting at elections, a citizen may speak and write on public questions. One with stamina and ability may often be the deciding factor in questions of the greatest importance to his local community or to a larger unit. He can participate unofficially in setting the stage for desirable official action; he can help to formulate programs; he can discuss those programs with his fellows; he can have something to say in the selection of public officials; and he and his friends may help to put life into the official actions to be taken in achieving the ends desired. To many people, even though very busy people, these activities seem not to scatter their ener-

[1]This bulletin is fourth of a series on The Challenge to Democracy prepared by members of the History and Government Department, Iowa State College.
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gies at all unduly, and the whole becomes a game — a fine, pleasant, worthwhile game in which teamwork and fellowship are of the utmost importance.

Many of the privileges extended are of real significance. Traditionally, through his service in the militia, the citizen made for the safety of himself, his family, his property and his community. Through his being deputized to assist officers under certain conditions he further increased that safety. Through his trial and grand jury service he may still help definitely to determine the law-abiding and law-enforcing tone of the community. Through his influence on public opinion, power may be mobilized to enforce law. Through his service as an election official he may help to insure the maintenance of democracy. Through his services on a school board he may become largely responsible for the success or failure of a school system. His work on a planning commission may become of such value as to become practically a monument to himself. So the years have gone by, opportunities for service have increased, and in this modern age with its maze of complex agencies and services those opportunities are almost infinite. One's participation helps to keep the whole on a high level; it helps to keep him informed as to the problems and the needs of the community; and it enables him to help toward the proper solution of those problems.

Finally, if he really prefers it, the citizen has the undistinguished privilege of disregarding many of his responsibilities and privileges. Even this appeals to some — in fact, to too many.

PAYING THE PIPER

No government can give everything for nothing. If one would dance, one must pay the piper. Loyal American citizens would do no less. The possession of rights and privileges in a democracy entails duties and obligations. In this busy age they are increasingly burdensome but are such as a good citizen can enjoy and be urged not to ignore. If he avoids them they may be assumed by less worthy souls to the detriment of himself and of the group. The members of a woman's club were told, after the passage of the suf-

frage amendment, that however much they might have opposed woman suffrage they must now go to the polls or expect their husbands to be outvoted by men and women who stood for undesirable policies. We attempt to develop a responsible citizenry — one which appreciates its privileges and responsibilities and gladly assumes the obligations entailed.

Citizens in a democracy owe allegiance, obedience and service. One should decide to what country he owes allegiance and should cling to no other. There is little place for a dual national allegiance. One should be true to the one even against all others. He may be separated from property and may be dividing a family; the necessity of an outright choice may be temporarily tragic and may evoke our sympathies; it is to be hoped, however, that it ultimately brings a satisfaction and a sense of pride.

A dictatorship demands subservience to the will of the dictator; a democracy in looking to the welfare of its citizens demands obedience to laws properly authorized in that democracy; anarchism tends to minimize obedience and to deny governmental restrictions. Either subservience or disobedience becomes both a sign and a cause of weakness of the citizenry. Obedience to properly constituted democratic authority, however, tends to establish a cooperative strength. An undue insistence upon individual wishes and preferences tends toward disunity, weakness and anarchy. In obedience, then, lies one element of our strength and one test of our citizenship.

Service of whatever nature in a democracy is not an unnecessary burden thrust upon the citizen. He and others serve in their own interests, to improve or to protect themselves, their families, their homes and their institutions. Specialists or professionals may be employed normally to render many services for us — as in fire fighting, in police duty or in normal military service. In emergencies we must call for a more general service and expect the parts to be well played as chosen, with approval, or as assigned by properly constituted authority.

There is an obligation to vote, where that privilege is ex-

tended, and a greater obligation to do it interestedly and intelligently. How would we expect mature Americans to take an effective stand on the lend-lease bill unless they took enough interest in it to acquire at least an intelligent, general understanding of what it was and what it was designed to do?

There is an obligation to share in bearing the costs of government and in rendering necessary services. To fail willfully in any point is to threaten gravely the character of the individual, to place an additional burden upon his fellows and to weaken the whole governmental structure. While due regard should be taken of the views, preferences and wishes of the individual in this regard, even the most solemnly assured rights must not be allowed to run counter to those of the group so as to threaten the welfare of the whole. Otherwise each does as he pleases and there is anarchy.

The costs of governmental services in an age when so much is demanded of our agencies have come to be immense. Some may be recognized readily, others are less easily recognized because of the numerous and complicated methods which we have devised in our efforts to make payments more convenient or less evident or to shift them to others. In any case the costs must be paid. Our obligation lies in an effort to see that more people study and understand costs of services, that appropriations and expenditures are not made rashly, that they are made honestly, that the plan of taxation is not unjust and that it is efficiently administered, including that part of the plan which pertains to ourselves. Obviously principles and plans of taxation, whether national, state or local, become fruitful, if difficult, fields of study.

Principles applicable to finance are in many respects applicable to services. There are practically always candidates eager to become office-holders to render certain types of service. At least an adequate number of employees usually become available for the many full-time wage and salaried positions, including those concerned with fire and police protection. These positions are regarded largely as opportunities. For various reasons, however, occasional service as witnesses, as jurors, as election officials, or as

members of the national guard has been too largely avoided by those who are unwilling to be inconvenienced. Some are reluctant to serve in any part of the armed forces of the United States; some want no part in responsibility for the general welfare of community, state or nation. Few of us would delay action until officers could arrive to check an individual attack on our home; many manage to convince themselves, however, that defense of the country either is not necessary, or should be left to professionals or to younger men — to anybody but themselves. The making of such a decision becomes another real test of citizenship. Men in other years have met that test. We can do no less.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

American democracy does not always operate smoothly. In the way are a number of obstacles which become other tests of citizenship. At times only a very small percentage of the potential voters may be found at the polls, and fewer still will study problems, take the lead or even vigorously support demands for legislation, for law enforcement or even for the betterment of their local communities. Bryce once said that selfish personal interest is a more objectionable obstacle to good citizenship than indolence. It is admittedly difficult to unscramble the motives back of the votes to determine who takes a given stand for one reason and who for another. In fact a given person may have both a good reason and a selfish one. Yet the selfish angle has in it the making of something other than good citizenship, and it is a pleasure, especially in a crisis, to see the welling up of an abundance of unselfishness and good will.

Diverse economic interests and opportunities offer widespread occasions for displays of selfishness. Opposition or support for programs of common interest are often too largely dependent upon the economic interests of groups or individuals — interests indeed which should not be ignored. Embarrassing questions arise also, as to what we mean by equality; and interesting viewpoints emerge as to the meaning of equality when carried into the social and economic field. The interests of each must be studied, and conflicts must be adjusted.

Diverse social grouping and interests likewise discourage mutual understanding, cooperation, a well-rounded citizenship and the fruition of democracy at its best. This discouragement continues so long as there is a persistent major emphasis concerning whether one's home is on the right side of the tracks; what were one's social affiliations as a youth; whether John Jones owns 10 acres or a section or with whose daughter he went driving on Sunday afternoon. Interest in such subjects will, and in some cases should, persist, but under the influence of forethought, sincerity and discretion that interest may become distinctly subordinated.

Racial and national origins, groupings, sympathies, and consequent maladjustments must still bear a large part of the responsibility for local, state and national difficulties in approaching the ideal in the operation of democracy. Loyalties based upon such groupings are not readily transferred or obliterated. Try as one may there are tinges, traces and memories of other days and of other countries — memories which indeed may mark strength of character and for which, up to a point, common decency demands respect. Unfortunately on the one hand demand for respect sometimes becomes a demand for undue liberty and the occasion for a display of arrogance; on the other hand something less than respect is sometimes accorded. From neither standpoint is the task a simple one, and yet civic loyalty and cooperation is imperative.

Much has been written of the political problems of other days. Of more immediate importance among us today are the growing complexities both of our present political questions and of the methods by which we express our preferences. We raise a number of complex issues to be voted on at an election; fail to label them for easy distinction; and then expect voters to recognize each readily and to vote intelligently for or against each in a brief time in an election booth. Likewise we list literally scores of names of candidates on voting machines or on ballots the size of a table top and expect voters to distinguish among them quickly and intelligently. A recent ballot, if memory serves correctly, had listed 172 candidates. We therefore need to agree to

representative, as opposed to popular, decision of many issues, and need to authorize the selection of a larger number of lesser officials by appointment rather than by election. These procedures would tend to simplify and to shorten the ballot. The smaller number of the more responsible officials then can be voted upon more intelligently from a relatively short list; further this would facilitate the fixing of responsibility.

Several other suggestions have proved to be of less value. Compulsory voting does not appear to be suited to our preferences; and neither the idea of recalling public officials who fail to please the public nor that of referring questions or legislative actions to the public seems to fire the American imagination. The trend appears to be away from the referendum and the recall rather than toward them. We may be able some day, however, to set up official polls of public opinion comparable to the Gallup poll and others to guide us in our activities.

Party spirit is easily understood and is to be commended. Our system of government makes large and valuable use of political parties. Party programs aid greatly in national official programs. To achieve this end, party organizations and a large measure of party regularity are necessary and desirable. Party spirit, however, may be carried so far as to result in the so-called one-party government. In states where a given party is habitually in power generation after generation there is likely to be neither a healthy opposition to make the incumbent party be circumspect nor will the rank and file of that party feel obligated to take an active and intelligent interest in politics. The party is expected to remain in power anyway. The situation is partially saved by primary or convention contests within the dominant party. There is a valuable service to be rendered, therefore, by those who participate actively, even as a minority, in preprimary contests and likewise by both those who are independent and those who are in opposition at regular elections. The same statement may apply to activities during a legislative session. In both cases, however, independents would probably become more effective by adhering to the party most nearly akin to their ideal.

SWINGING LOW

Unfortunately the spirit of a pessimist might be further depressed except that we do find several opportunities to remedy evils. Diversity in moral standards and all the gossip, bitterness and heart-aches engendered thereby must be ranked as still another obstacle to the achievement of the harmonious political and social community. A generous use of common sense is here demanded; possibly the ways of some are to be mended; probably the horizons of others are to be widened; and certainly a wide display of the mantle of charity is likely to improve the community spirit.

Willful, careless or even honest failure to understand and appreciate the viewpoint of others is one of our great difficulties. The willful and careless failures to understand must be curbed. The honest misunderstanding of others is more of a problem. One whose viewpoint is firmly fixed from long contact and sad experiences with a given acute problem does not readily appreciate the viewpoint of others — be the problem one of agriculture, labor, politics, race or religion. Education, experience, patience and much forebearance may be necessary to bring out the finest in the way of citizenship.

It is recognized widely that urban and rural areas have certain dissimilar viewpoints. What has been regarded as good for the one has appeared to have little value for the other. Contacts in organizations have been too few whether they be of a business nature, political, social, educational or religious. There is a real value in emphasis upon a number of interests and outlooks which are mutual to town and country. There is a similar value in continuing the friendly relationships established by the children of the two areas in schools and churches, each serving increasingly wide areas. It is to be hoped that such friendships may be maintained and valued, that the line marking corporate limits of urban areas may become less distinct and that cooperative efforts may become increasingly representative of wide areas. A case in point known to several Iowa people was an attractive program presented recently at a club meeting in Baltimore by a little group of people from a rural Maryland county and from Washington, D. C. The effort helped the three

groups to a better understanding. Similar activities are to be found in Iowa.

There are still other obstacles which impose limitations upon the enjoyment of the influences of democracy. Children denied the opportunity to attend a first-rate school have ground to question the existence of democracy in education. Government attention to education and the maintenance of a high literacy might be so directed as to pay fine dividends by way of aiding in the maintenance and enjoyment of democracy.

There are still far too many small, inefficient, one-room schools and too much occasion for bitterness growing out of the efforts to consolidate. The location of the new consolidated school is still a bone of contention, and the issuing of bonds and the imposition of taxes are still questions upon which individuals and communities frequently fail to agree. We still have the problem of finding, training and placing well-balanced teachers of the kind which Howard Rushmore believes might have shown him the value and the working of democracy and might have helped to save him from the tragedy of spending half a dozen of his best years as a mid-western communist. Citizens can be of assistance. Yet in Iowa only 10 percent of the potential voters vote in school elections; many parent-teacher association meetings barely have a quorum.

There is also the problem of social opportunities. Residents of many areas find it difficult to be self-sufficing in this respect and still have not been able to establish satisfactory contacts with those of nearby areas. Parelleling the unsatisfactory school situation just mentioned, it was brought out in a committee meeting of responsible Iowans recently that literally hundreds of small rural areas in our own state, and immense sections of our urban areas, are in no church programs whatever. Some groups are too small to build and support a church; some are cut off by distance and by poor roads; and some are embarrassed to attend churches attended largely by a more prosperous constituency.

To establish adequate social contacts will probably require the establishing of schools and churches which may become

social centers as of other years, and the extension of an improved road system facilitating local and urban contacts. Further there is still need for a larger use of the Community Council, or community clearing house, idea of coordinate agencies willing to render assistance. Under such a plan representative agencies exchange ideas, assume obligations to solve problems reported and attempt an improvement for all concerned. Such coordination yields remarkable results. Iowa debt-adjustment committees have reduced litigation and secured reductions and amicable settlements in cases of debts amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars. If one isolated community can thus take on new life why not another? If one "tough" gang can be interested in hobbies, carpentering and toy building and can become an actual community asset why not another? If in one community a group can care for the underprivileged children why can't it be done in another?

The road problem is still a serious one. There is less occasion than formerly for demonstrations of pettiness, wrangling and selfishness over the location of through highways to be paved and to offer hard-surfaced ways to market for only a minority. There remains, however, the question of expanding the network. Interests, then, are still in conflict, and many motives are still ulterior. Similar difficulties lie in the way of satisfactory programs of taxation, drainage and drainage districts, fence laws, weed laws and conservation programs. Such problems frequently test the operation of a democracy and test the democratic ideas, ideals and standards of the citizen.

RECOVERING A BALANCE

In the face of such problems citizens of a democracy must think clearly to maintain a balance. They must be active or opportunities pass on. By maintaining an unflagging interest, by careful consideration of endless problems and by vigorous action, in due season the citizenry of the democracy may achieve results of inestimable value to themselves, to their country and to the world.

It is sometimes argued that changing conditions raise questions as to the effectiveness of democracy. Suppose

the simple agrarian type of society does give place to an undreamed of complexity. May we not apply principles enunciated by the best trained minds in the field of political science and adjust government to our changing needs without abandoning democratic principles? Suppose the day does pass, or has passed, when good governments generally follow the hands-off principle. Does it follow that a country in which there is as much big business as is in the United States cannot find executives who understand business? Let us suppose many to whom the vote has been extended have failed to take an ardent interest in all phases of political life, and let us suppose that they have not always carefully examined both candidates and policies in a cool, rational manner. Does it follow that nothing can be done about it and that democracy must fail? Does it follow that education, opportunity at the polls and civic responsibility are all of no avail? Does it follow that neither you nor I nor millions like us can take an interest, study candidates and policies nor organize nor aid our friends and others in those actions?

It must be admitted that until that greater interest and discrimination is attained some of our difficulties may continue and may even increase. It is true that suffrage was greatly restricted for many years after our war for independence. It was believed that by no means all were competent to participate in the responsibilities involved in voting. Even recently an author argued that modern differential biology and psychology and the Army Mental Tests of 1917-18 all warned us to safeguard intelligent voting in order to install in government superior types with expert knowledge adequate to cope with the difficult problems of today. If the suffrage is to continue to be widespread we need to be encouraged to consider our problems seriously and intelligently and not to elect a man merely because he talks well or sings well or employs an interesting band. We do need in office able men with character and expert knowledge, and we want them selected intelligently by the people.

Whatever the formal and technical advantages sometimes ascribed to an autocratic government, a democracy through

proper action on the part of its people may achieve some measure of success in the same fields and retain its superior advantage in others. It may tend to develop a unity of will; to simplify its structure; to speed up its decisions and to fix authority more definitely. Even continuity of personnel and policy might be more largely emphasized without destroying the principles of democracy. Further, our government can be improved to the best of our ability to make it better suited to the exacting requirements of our complicated industrial civilization. In the meantime democracy can only do its level best.

Many opportunities are necessarily indicated or implied in discussions of privileges, obligations and obstacles. Many of these suggest opportunities which an alert citizen will scarcely overlook. A privilege extended is likely to carry with it an opportunity. An obligation incurred in all probability involves an opportunity to further the interests of the whole. Recognition and removal of obstacles in the way of those interests most certainly involve such opportunities and may lead into fields obscured from the vision of the narrow, the shortsighted and the selfish. Granted that, after all, one's duties in making a living, maintaining a home and caring for his family do take the major portion of his time and effort, there remains the possibility of finding innumerable opportunities to render civic services great and small. Many of these, indeed, may pay rather definite direct dividends by way of effects upon his own immediate groups or interests. Others must be credited to service for a good cause — service of society at large. Some of these services might be comparable to those of persons who serve as a revolving panel to advise certain city councils, or comparable to the services of a most energetic planning commission in Adair County, Iowa, where wholesome advice on half a dozen important activities has literally altered the civic atmosphere of the county.

To vote more intelligently, young Americans may need to resort more generally to the Sac City, Iowa, plan of organizing a forum and holding meetings and listening to expert addresses in order to get the facts before they go to the

polls. They may need to resort to a more general observance of Citizenship Day, already designated by Congress and widely observed on the third Sunday in May.

Lines of action are emphasized by asking some of the following questions. Are you certain that you are registered, that you have paid your poll tax if such is required and that you have located the polling place for your precinct? Do you know your local party leaders and whether an undue number are relatives and employees of some office holder? Do you know of other influential people, not now active in politics, who might help to alter undesirable conditions?

Did you attend the last caucus of your party in your ward or precinct? Was it necessary to rent a hall or was it possible to get the group into some small room or office? Attend the next one; get up a crowd; note what percentage of the voters come; note whether you are familiar with the issues of the day, the effectiveness of your tax system, your school system, your fire and police protection, and schemes for improvement. See if you approve of the action taken and of the way in which it was taken. Inform yourself; interest your friends in the things which you believe to be if importance, and stand together. Become active yourself, when there is an opportunity; present a resolution; nominate your preference. See if you effect a "tune up" of your community.

Take part in the primaries, in the selection of able and worthy candidates for office and in the demand for their appointment of a trained, efficient personnel.

In any event the great majority of Americans are convinced that the democratic way of life is superior to any other way known; that good citizenship will strengthen that way of life, preserve it and make it more valuable; and that there are boundless opportunities to maintain or even to improve the quality of that citizenship.

The Challenge to Democracy

The democratic way of life is being challenged today all over the world. Its superiority is widely denied and its security is seriously imperiled. The American people consequently are interested in understanding the dangers that confront them and in guarding against them. Democracy needs strengthening both internally and externally, and farm people can and must and will help do the job, both because of their numbers and because they know perhaps better than any other group the meaning of the democratic way of life.

It is the purpose of this bulletin and others in its series to show what produced the present situation and suggest some of the things that need to be done about it—not by farm people alone but by rural America and urban America working together. This is the fourth of eight bulletins on the subject. They deal with the following topics:

Democracy on trial.
How much centralization in government?
The place of the family farm.
The test of citizenship.
Democracy and nationalism.
Toward a new rural statesmanship.
Improving public administration.
The machine and democracy.

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